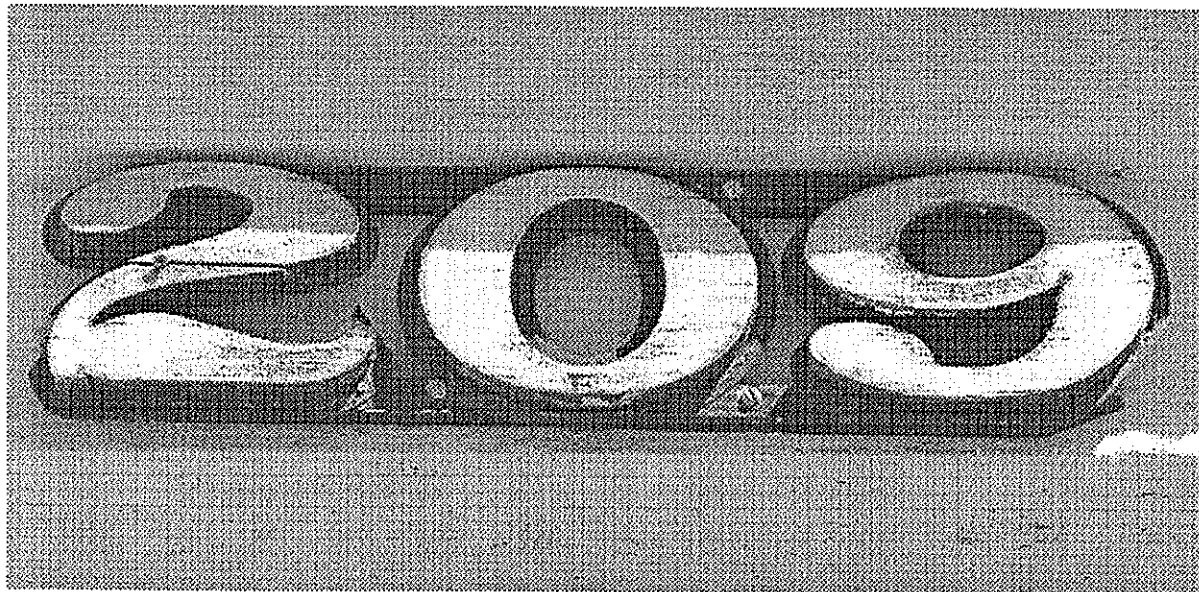


Strawberry Gazette

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The old number sign at Building 209 became a historic marker at the VA of WLA north campus.

VA TO REHAB BUILDING 209 FOR HOMELESS VETS

BY TERENCE LYONS

One of three buildings on the West Los Angeles VA campus earmarked for housing homeless veterans in 2007 received \$20 million in June of this year for renovation and rehabilitation. According to an announcement issued by U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Representative Henry Waxman (D-Los Angeles), and L.A. County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, the funding commitment was made by Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki in a June 16 meeting among them all in Feinstein's Washington office.

According to the announcement, the money is "to fund long-term therapeutic housing for chronically homeless veterans." This is the first funding for the three-building project that then-VA Secretary Jim Nicholson committed to three years ago as a result of what was

then a three-year effort spearheaded by Santa Monica Mayor (then Councilmember) Bobby Shriver.

The three buildings - 205, 208, and 209, long empty or underutilized - face each other across an open-ended quadrangle near the north end of the VA grounds. Building 209, the one to receive the \$20 million rehab, has been used as a stand-by or emergency resource in Los Angeles's cold-weather homeless shelter program in years past, but has otherwise been vacant but for a print studio installed during the last year by Lauren Bon's *Strawberry Flag* art project on the quadrangle - a project that has attracted many people to the site since last autumn, both veterans and visitors, including a November 2009 visit by Representative Robert Filner (D-San Diego) who chairs the House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee and a visit

by VA Secretary Shinseki July 20 after the funding announcement.

"[This] therapeutic housing project at the West Los Angeles VA facility offers the promise of refuge and resources for chronically homeless veterans in the region," said Senator Feinstein, "yet it has been a long, drawn-out process to see it brought to fruition." But Building 209 will most probably be used to house veterans already participating in other VA programs and provide "long-term therapeutic supportive housing" for them, said William Daniels, Chief of Mental Health at the West L.A. VA, who is the L.A. area VA homeless coordinator, speaking shortly after the announcement.

Representative Waxman said, "This action will provide critical long-term therapeutic housing that is long overdue." Supervisor Yaroslavsky called the funding

"a milestone in addressing this issue" that "has been a long time coming."

Use of the Money

Mr. Daniels said that with the \$20 million, the VA would itself undertake the rehab of Building 209, with \$10 million expected to go to seismic repairs and the other \$10 million sufficient to cover "plumbing, elevators, interior renovation and reconfiguration - tenant improvements and infrastructure," so that the building would be "ready to go."

He expected that the actual operation of the ready-to-go building would then be contracted out by the VA to a "community partner" such as the Salvation Army, Volunteers of America, or New Directions - "that's the direction we are heading."

Chief of Mental Health Daniels said the building will be dedicated to

the treatment of veterans "in recovery" from substance abuse or mental health issues, rather than provide housing for veterans who are simply homeless (for whom, he said, the VA operates or participates in other programs). Building 209 may very well be rehabbed in the format of approximately 50 single-occupancy, one-bedroom/private bath/full kitchen apartments called out in an earlier December 2008 solicitation for offers, he said. A place a veteran might live until he dies? "Quite possibly," he replied.

Reaction to the announcement of funding for Building 209 from outside the VA was positive but, in some cases, mixed. Santa Monica Mayor Bobby Shriver, who led a years-long effort to obtain the 2007 commitment to devote the three buildings to homeless

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THE ISSUE OF HOMELESS VETERANS

BY TERENCE LYONS

In our inaugural issue, the *Strawberry Gazette* reported on the November 2009 pledge of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki to "ending homelessness among veterans within the next five years." [*Strawberry Gazette*, February 2010] At that time, we said that we "hope[d] to bring more news of the VA's response to homelessness among vets in the coming months." In this issue, we do just that.

Shinseki bravely acknowledged the size and importance of the problem

in his November 2009 address to the National Summit on Homeless Veterans: "We conservatively estimate that 131,000 veterans live on our streets - men and women, young and old, fully functioning and disabled, from every war generation, even the current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan." So what has the VA actually done? And done here. On the ground.

Gen. Shinseki Visits *Strawberry Flag*

When Secretary Shinseki visited the West L.A. VA July 20, he toured the *Strawberry Flag* quadrangle and chatted with veterans working on the project - many of whom have been homeless in the past - and with Metabolic Studio staff on the site. This, after Lauren Bon's March 2010 visit with Shinseki in

Washington, D.C. to discuss the *Flag* and the quadrangle.

The Secretary also looked in on Building 209 in that quadrangle, the building to which he had on June 16 allocated \$20 million for renovation and rehabilitation "to fund long-term therapeutic housing for chronically homeless veterans," according to a statement released by U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein.

Funds Allocated

The VA budget for Fiscal Year 2010 included \$3.2 billion for assistance to homeless veterans and an additional \$50 million specifically for the renovation of vacant buildings on VA campuses to be used as supportive housing for homeless veterans. [*Strawberry Gazette*, March 2010] The funds that Secretary Shinseki

committed to Building 209 in June are from that money, said William Daniels, Chief of Mental Health for the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, who is the L.A. area VA homeless coordinator.

While the five-year pledge has been put into action on the West Los Angeles VA campus with more specific commitments and the allocation of funds, there are not as yet any additional beds. What has been done, and where do things stand?

The Big Step

The biggest step locally in furtherance of Secretary Shinseki's pledge has been the allocation of \$20 million for the rehabilitation of Building 209. In this issue of the *Gazette*, veterans correspondent Terence Lyons reports on how that money may

be used, and what reaction has been to the news of this funding. The subject is also addressed in several of this issue's *Gazette* interviews.

The Interviews

This month, the *Gazette* examines the VA's attack on homelessness among vets by listening to the voices of several officials who have something to say on the subject: the VA medical doctor who is responsible for all the mental health programs on the West Los Angeles campus, the congressman who chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee, the Santa Monica mayor who has been fighting to move homeless vets into Building 209 and others, the local congressman who represents the West L.A. VA campus, and the county supervisor

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Seven out of ten Americans are one paycheck away from being homeless.

— Pras Michel

We have come dangerously close to accepting the homeless situation as a problem that we just can't solve.

— Linda Lingle

VA TO REHAB BUILDING 209... CONTINUED »

veterans housing, said, "Although we should be happy that the money came, I still feel deeply outraged that it's taken six years. I think it's equivalently outrageous that I hear — which I heard from Ralph [Tillman, VA GLA Chief of External Affairs] — that it will now take four years to build out the building and have the first vet move in, according to whatever the VA process is and how they do the rehab, the design, and so forth and so on. I think that has to be fixed. We can't wait another four years."

The *Los Angeles Times* editorialized July 21 on the occasion of Secretary Shinseki's visit to the West L.A. VA grounds, "Not to sound like ingrates, but why not convert all three buildings at the same time? The cost per unit would be lower and more beds would be assured." Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said the *Times* editorial was "wrong" and that "Shinseki, [Senator Diane] Feinstein, and [Congressman Henry] Waxman deserve praise, not criticism."

Dr. Jon Sherin is responsible for all the mental health programs on the VA West Los Angeles campus. Asked whether he had a preference as to whether the rehabbed Building 209 should be operated by the VA itself or by a community partner, replied, "I don't really have a preference. I think there are advantages to both models. What I really do hope is that we use this opportunity to employ veterans in the restoration of this building and that we do our best to get veterans involved in administering the programs. Not only is that something that's good in terms of veterans having jobs in this financial climate, but it also is very therapeutic activity — to be gainfully employed, to be actively engaged, and to find meaning in daily activities."

As to whether the rehabilitation of Building 209 will actually bring homeless veterans in off the streets or rearrange vets already

within programs scattered around the VA, Sherin said, "That's a good question, although you've got to understand that that's largely the same population. There certainly are homeless veterans who don't access the VA, but there are veterans here who access the VA who become homeless who may actually have another alternative if we have a different type of program here. So — and, again, it gets back to the model: Do we use space here for patients who are in programs, who are hospitalized and they're needing space? Or do we use it as a space that could be accessed from any given portal? I would say that these are not exclusive. I think, All of the above."

The Other Buildings

Senator Feinstein's statement on the funding for Building 209 said, "At the [June 16] meeting, Secretary Shinseki also committed to working with Senator Feinstein and Representative Waxman in the months ahead to identify additional funds to renovate buildings 205 and 208, the other two West Los Angeles VA campus buildings designated for homeless veteran housing."

VA Chief of Mental Health Daniels would not hazard a guess as to when any action might be taken on the other two buildings committed to housing homeless vets in 2007. Regarding Buildings 205 and 208, Dr. Sherin said, "I know that there's a lot of interest in developing this whole piece of the campus to make it a bit of a thriving community for homeless veterans. . . . But, you know, having interest in doing that and having a model is one thing. Having adequate resource is another. And I know that there is great interest locally outside of the VA and also within the VA to make that happen. But I don't see that happening at this point. There's no real clear evidence to suggest that that's going to happen in the near future."

"We finally got to first base," Santa Monica Mayor Shriver said. "But I want to get to second, third, and home base ASAP."

THE ISSUE OF HOMELESS VETERANS CONTINUED »

whose district includes the campus and who has been a leader on local homeless issues.

We also listen to the voices of two local veterans who have something to say on the subject: an upbeat graduate of the Dom who now works in the *Strawberry Flag* print studio, and an angry "Old Guard" vet who has a lawsuit pending over his weekly protests against the West L.A. VA.

The VA homeless coordinator for the Los Angeles area, GLAHS Chief of Mental Health William Daniels, did not provide an interview that the *Gazette* requested for this issue.

Historical Perspective

As always, this month's issue of the *Gazette* seeks to provide some historical context for the subject at hand, in this case the VA's response to homelessness among veterans. Sharon Selhon of the Studio for Southern California History and the Metabolic Studio's Janet Owen Driggs examine that response over the years, particularly at the West Los Angeles VA property.

R.I.P.: A Veteran Who Served Homeless Vets

In this month's obituary, the *Gazette* pays tribute to Dwight Radcliff, president and CEO of the United States Veterans Initiative.

And so, this issue of the *Strawberry Gazette* focuses on the issue of homeless veterans.

AN INTERVIEW WITH:

CONGRESSMAN HENRY WAXMAN

Congressman Waxman represents California's 30th District in the U.S. House of Representatives; his district includes the West Los Angeles VA property. Together with U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein and L.A. County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, Waxman was with VA Secretary Eric Shinseki when Shinseki announced the allocation of \$20 million to rehabilitate Building 209 for homeless veterans.

The *Strawberry Gazette* submitted a series of written questions to Rep. Waxman, and he responded in writing on August 3, 2010.

Strawberry Gazette (SG): Could you please give me a brief history of your work when it comes to ending homelessness for veterans here in Southern California?

Henry Waxman (HW): The 30th Congressional District includes the West L.A. VA, which is the largest VA facility in the nation, and it is located in Los Angeles County, which has more homeless veterans than any other county in the nation. I have an obligation to do everything I can to ensure that the federal government addresses the myriad needs of our homeless veterans. We owe our service men and women a debt of gratitude for their sacrifices, and I believe it is unconscionable that veterans are living on our streets.

We must recognize that today's veterans face unique challenges. An estimated 620,000 troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), or depression. Women veterans and veteran families also deserve a special focus.

Since 2007, Congress has expanded mental healthcare services, funded research for PTSD and TBI, significantly ramped up the number of mental health professionals, and provided confidential mental health screenings for returning veterans. Congress has increased overall funding for veterans' services by 60% in the last four years, and we must continue to work to improve the services we provide.

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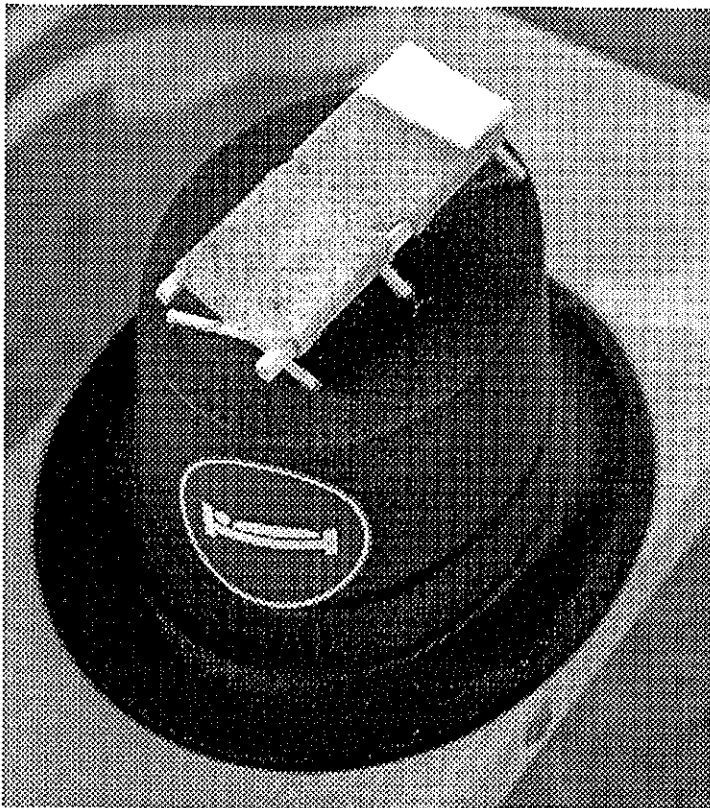
Sometimes I feel that I don't get the same treatment at the hospital because I'm homeless and they think no one cares about me. — John Sullivan, Vet

We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.

— Mother Teresa

The homeless are your mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. We need to protect our community.

— Steve Huston



A playful event in which the VA community and their friends wore top hats with oots on them preceded the announcement that the Strawberry Flag quad was gaining the attention of the federal VA administration.

THE CHECKERED HISTORY OF THE VA AND HOMELESS VETS

BY JANET OWEN DRIGGS AND SHARON SEKHON

How can it be that after 145 years of generous welfare provision and organized veteran action, 100,000 veterans are homeless in the United States on any given night? Although numerous contradictory responses are possible here, at least part of the answer must lie with the relationship between land use and property prices, which too often turns veteran housing issues into a political cannonball.

Offering a case in point, the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration (WLA-VA) is surrounded by some of the world's most expensive real estate. Once part of an immense cattle ranch, the 600-acre site was gifted to veterans by Senator John P. Jones and Arcadia B. de Baker in 1887 to support a federal soldiers home. At its peak, the home housed around 4,000 veterans, whose presence stimulated local development.

From 1888 through the 1940s, the U.S. Congress allocated funds and sought to protect the facility from enterprising realtors. In 1944 the GI Bill increased veteran funding, which also benefited from such

presidential platforms as Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" and Richard Nixon's government expansion. With the rise of the New Right in the 1960s and conservative efforts to trim "big" government, these same programs were attacked. Dependent upon the outcome of such political wars, the WLA-VA has seen the growth of funding and its drastic slashing.

Paralleling such fluctuations, the increasing market value of WLA-VA land has complicated the relationship of veterans to the land. Not only was veteran access to the facilities limited over time, the site has been under scrutiny for development or outright sale since the 1920s, and the once 600-acre parcel has been subsequently eroded to 388 acres.¹

Ever-Increasing Land Prices
Although the perceived value of the veterans' land and its surrounds rose dramatically when the future site of the WLA-VA was selected to host a soldiers home, West Los Angeles remained relatively agrarian until the 1920s when Wilshire Boulevard's "Miracle Mile" and the new cities of Beverly Hills, Brentwood, and Westwood

fixed the soldiers home in a web of suburban development.

Between 1923 when land at Wilshire and Robertson sold for \$6,500 per acre, and 1930 when businesses there cost more than \$350,000, property prices along Wilshire Boulevard increased significantly.² In 1928 the *Los Angeles Times* estimated the facility's market value to be "conservatively, very conservatively, set at \$7,219,891. The property is well worth ten times that sum if appraised by a professional."³

As West L.A. land prices rose, so local opposition to veteran proximity grew. Even the 1932 construction of the National Cemetery met with protest. Not least from a Mrs. Silas Slusher who feared for the value of her \$200,000 property. Arguing for Slusher, lawyer Walter Haas contended, "It is right they should have such a place, but it should be developed in an area that is not already built up with fine homes."⁴

Depreciating Veteran Status

The post-World War II housing crisis saw government-subsidized home mortgages introduced for

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HENRY WAXMAN CONTINUED »

SG: How serious is our homeless veteran problem in L.A. County? In California?

HW: The problem is vast and the need is undeniable. The VA's national estimate for homeless veterans nationwide is 107,000. California has the highest number of homeless veterans in the nation. The Los Angeles Homeless Service Administration estimates that there are more than 6,500 homeless veterans in Los Angeles County. We must address this issue in earnest and as quickly as possible.

SG: Let's talk about Buildings 205, 208, 209—why those buildings? Why that quad? There are several other empty buildings on that part of the Veterans Administration West Los Angeles Healthcare Center campus. Why are those buildings the ones that are/were targeted to house homeless veterans?

HW: In 2005, the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Local Advisory Panel accepted testimony about a proposal for the three buildings. These buildings are vacant or underutilized and will allow the VA to provide long-term therapeutic housing. I also believe other buildings on the campus should be evaluated for uses that most benefit veterans.

It is my strong belief that the VA must strictly adhere to the purpose for which the West L.A. VA land was generously donated and deeded in 1888—to permanently serve veterans. In 2007, Senator Feinstein and I were able to enact legislation that protects the entire campus in perpetuity from being sold or used for commercial purposes.

SG: What has been the process of getting to the \$20 million appropriation for building 209 that Secretary Shinseki recently announced? What was the pivotal moment?

HW: Unfortunately, it has been a slower process than I had hoped

for. The pivotal moment was in a meeting in June when Secretary of Veterans Affairs Shinseki gave Senator Feinstein, Supervisor Yaroslavsky, and me his personal commitment to fully fund the restoration of Building 209 by 2012. The Secretary indicated that the project will be handled from VA headquarters, and we expect to receive an official timeline from the Secretary's office shortly.

SG: What was your reaction to the decision to allocate the funding? What will \$20 million buy?

HW: I was delighted by Secretary Shinseki's decision, and the \$20 million will be used to fully restore and rehabilitate Building 209 for long-term therapeutic housing for homeless veterans.

SG: Who will manage the \$20 million and the process going forward to hire designers, builders, etc.? What will actually go on in the buildings?

HW: The project will be handled by the Secretary's office at VA headquarters in Washington D.C. We have not yet seen the details of the plan, but I have a real interest in them because our homeless veterans have complex challenges that must be adequately addressed. SG: Just the other week, staff from Senator Barbara Boxer's office visited the quad and the buildings—what is your hope to now engage the other U.S. senator from California?

HW: I have tremendous respect for Senator Boxer. She has been a great partner on veterans' issues and a host of others.

SG: What is your timeframe for Building 209? When do you hope to cut the ribbon for an opening and what about the other buildings?

HW: As I mentioned, Secretary Shinseki announced that Building 209 will be completed in 2012. The sooner we can cut the ribbon, the sooner we can provide long-term therapeutic housing for homeless veterans.



Rochelle Fabb reads *The Little Engine That Could* to a crowd at High Tea on April 15th, 2010.